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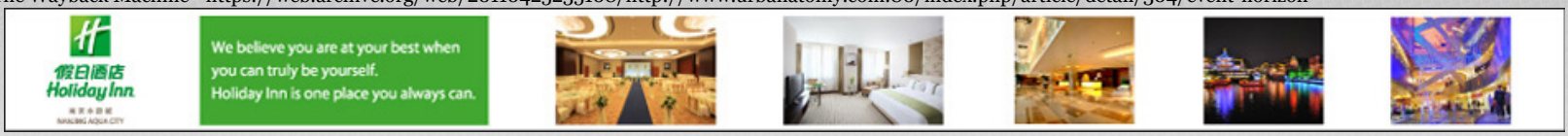

Event Horizon

by nickland @ Friday, 15 April 2011 15:45

People gravitate to cities, but what are cities gravitating into? Some strange possibilities suggest themselves.

Cities are defined by social density. This simple but hugely consequential insight provides the central thesis of Edward Glaeser's Triumph of the City: How our Greatest Invention Makes us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier (2011), where it is framed as both an analytical tool and a political project.

"Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They enable us to work and play together, and their success depends on the demand for physical connection," Glaeser remarks.

High-density urban life approaches a tautology, and it is one that Glaeser not only observes, but also celebrates. Closely-packed people are more productive. As Alfred Marshall noted in 1920, 'agglomeration economies' feed a self-reinforcing process of social compression that systematically out-competes diffuse populations in all fields of industrial activity. In addition, urbanites are also happier, longer-living, and their ecological footprint is smaller, Glaeser insists, drawing upon a variety of social scientific evidence to make his case. Whether social problems are articulated in economic, hedonic, or environmental terms, (dense) urbanism offers the most practical solution.

The conclusion Glaeser draws, logically enough, is that densification should be encouraged, rather than inhibited. He interprets sprawl as a reflection of perverse incentives, whilst systematically contesting the policy choices that restrain the trend to continuous urban compression. His most determined line of argumentation is directed in favor of high-rise development, and against the planning restrictions that keep cities stunted. A city that is prevented from soaring will be over-expensive and under-excited, inflexible, inefficient, dirty, backward-looking, and peripherally sprawl- or slum-cluttered. Onwards and upwards is the way.

Urban planning has its own measure for density: the FAR (or Floor-to-Area Ratio), typically determined as a limit set upon permitted concentration. An FAR of 2, for instance, allows a developer to build a two-story building over an entire area, a four-story building on half the area, or an eight-story building on a quarter of the area. An FAR sets an average ceiling on

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urban development. It is essentially a bureaucratic device for deliberately stunting vertical growth

As Glaeser shows, Mumbai's urban development problems have been all-but-inevitable given the
that was set for India's commercial capital in 1964. Sprawling slum development has been the en

Whilst sparring with Jane Jacobs over the impact of high-rise construction on urban life, Glaeser is
the importance of organic development, based on spontaneous patterns of growth. Both attribute
problems to policy errors, most obviously the attempt to channel – and in fact deform – the urbar
bureaucratic fiat. When cities fail to do what comes naturally, they fail, and what comes naturally,
densification.

It would be elegant to refer to this deep trend towards social compression, the emergence, growt
settlement, as urbanization, but we can't do that. Even when awkwardly named, however, it expose
historical reality, with striking implications, amounting almost to a specifically social law of gravit
an understanding of the forces of social attraction support predictions, or at least the broad outli
since these forces of agglomeration and intensification manifestly shape the future.

John M. Smart makes only passing references to cities, but his Developmental Singularity (DS) hyp
to urban theory because it focuses upon the topic of density. He argues that acceleration, or time-
aspect of a general evolutionary (more precisely, evolutionary-developmental, or 'evo devo') trenc
energy, and mass. This 'STEM-compression' is identified with ascending intelligence (and negativ
cosmic-historical drive to the augmentation of computational capacity that marries "*evolutionary*
creative, and divergent [with] *developmental processes* that produce statistically predictable, robu
convergent structures and trajectories."

Smart notes that "the leading edge of structural complexity in our universe has apparently transit
distributed early matter, to galaxies, to replicating stars within galaxies, to solar systems in galac
special planets in those zones, to higher life within the surface biomass, to cities, and soon, to in
be a vastly more local subset of Earth's city space."

Audaciously, Smart projects this trend to its limit: "Current research (Aaronson 2006, 2008) now
computers based on quantum theory, one of the two great theories of 20th century physics, will r
only *quadratically* growing computational capacity over today's classical computing. In the searcl
computational capacity emergence, we can therefore look to the second great physical theory of t
the DS hypothesis is correct, what we can call relativistic computing (a black-hole-approximating
the final common attractor for all successfully developing universal civilizations."

Conceive the histories of cities, therefore, as the initial segments of trajectories that curve asymp
the ultimate event horizon of the physical universe. The beginning is recorded fact and the end is
what lies in between, i.e. next?

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